HOWARD UNIVERSITY

School of Communications
Department of Communication, Culture
and Media Studies

March 23, 2014

The Honorable Tom Wheeler, Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Re: Comcast-Time Warner Cable proposed merger, MB Docket No. 14-57

Dear Chairman Wheeler and Members of the Commission:

Howard University's mission and role as an advocate for civil rights and equal opportunity compels us, the Howard Media Group (HMG), to unequivocally oppose the proposed merger of communications behemoths Comcast and Time Warner Cable.

The planned merger would further deteriorate what little remains of the chance for socially and economically marginalized groups to attain fair access to the Internet. The failure to protect the rights of such groups by implementing egalitarian public policy measures against monopolistic corporate interests will represent total abrogation of the responsibilities for which the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has been charged.

Access to the Internet looms as the largest civil and economic rights issue of the decade. We cannot sit idly by as our government, through the courts, the FCC and the Department of Justice, retreats from anti-trust regulation and threatens to mortgage the future of American citizens by denying them equality of telecommunications information and digital access.

Specifically, the $45 billion Comcast acquisition of Time Warner – the two largest broadband providers in the United States – poses a threat to freedom of speech by imposing financial barriers to the disadvantaged with needs to connect for vital education and communication services. It will exacerbate the digital divide while limiting public access to a staggering amount of information. The First Amendment implications for citizens are dire because the Comcast-Time Warner monopoly would wield enormous gatekeeper power without suitable balance.

For a most other Americans, the merger would also be a lose-lose proposition. Workers would lose jobs as operations are consolidated. Citizens would lose alternatives for low-cost access to the Internet to take self-improvement courses, find employment, communicate with family and friends and engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Because the combined company would likely control between 30 and 35 percent of the U.S. broadband market, there would be the ominous possibility of fewer watchdogs to monitor corporate and governmental power and the continued loss of privacy as the conglomerate facilitates illegal government surveillance.

While much of the muted media response to this potentially unfettered land grab points out the impact of the billion-dollar merger on the entertainment habits of its "customers." We believe that concern is merely a straw man compared to the real harm the merger would unleash on the public.

The monopoly formed by a Comcast-Time Warner Cable merger would control 19 of the 20 largest data markets. Wired broadband service, according to GigaOm, a business and technology blog, is the "most important pipe coming into people's homes (after power and water)."

For low income and some minorities, the implications are even more urgent. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20 percent of Americans have no access to the Internet. They are mostly the elderly, the very young and those of low income. With cable costs rising faster than inflation, prices are only going higher and beyond the reach of some families today. Comcast typically charges more than $100 monthly for average bundled cable service.

Professor Tim Wu, in an article in the *New Yorker* said, "Cable is now so expensive that it creates poverty issues: in poorer households it competes with basics like food, rent, or health insurance. If you wanted to help the poor, you could do worse than cutting cable bills."

Today, some high schools teachers require research for lessons to be done on the Internet. If a student's family cannot afford the Internet, they are not able to do their homework. Or they must do it using their wireless cell phones, often searching for Wi-Fi hot spots after school. In the absence of affordable broadband service, cell phones are becoming the lifeline for some families.

Fundamentally, it is important to be mindful that the Internet was largely created and paid for by public funding and evolved from a collaboration of government, academia and private industry. It, therefore, should be a public utility, which provides telecommunications services, not a private playground for a too-big-to-fail corporate monopoly.

It's not too late to stop this deal. The FCC must be held accountable for fulfilling its responsibility to protect and serve the public interest. We agree with Tim Wu, a professor at Columbia Law School who, in addition to other reasons cited here, believes the FCC is obligated to ensure that cable prices are "reasonable." Wu offers a simple rule of thumb: unless the FCC thinks there is a realistic chance that the deal will reverse two decades of rising prices, it should stop the merger.

Respectfully,
Howard Media Group:

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Dr. Chukwuka Onwumechili
Dr. Yong Jin Park

SOURCES:

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CC:
Commissioner Mignon Clyburn
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel
Commissioner Ajit Pai
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